

## AMERICA CITY

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Also by Chris Beckett

*The Turing Test* (short story collection)

*The Holy Machine*

*Marcher*

*Dark Eden*

*Mother of Eden*

*Daughter of Eden*

*The Peacock Clock* (short story collection)

Coming soon

*Spring Tide* (short story collection)

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Chris Beckett



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There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,  
A wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes.  
This terror of the hall-troops had come far.  
A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on  
As his powers waxed and his worth was proved.  
In the end each clan on the outlying coasts  
Beyond the whale-road had to yield to him  
And begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.

*Beowulf*, translated by Seamus Heaney

For my dear son Dom

# PART 1

## CHAPTER 1

**T**wo hundred miles south of the Azores, warm moist air is rising rapidly. It forms a kind of gigantic cylinder, a hollow tree trunk made of moving air. The tree has roots that are also air: warm, humid air rushing over the balmy waves toward that central trunk. The air cools as it rises. Eleven miles up, it spills over sideways like spreading branches. In the roots below, air still flows inwards over warm sea.

The planet, meanwhile, is spinning beneath its loose skin of air. At that latitude it spins faster than a jet plane flies, and it wraps those inward-flowing winds around one another to form a counter-clockwise spiral of warm wet air. It's huge, that spiral, twice the size of Texas, but it's simply air made turbulent by heat, as water in a pan is made turbulent by the hot plate beneath it.

According to the United States Weather Bureau this spinning patch of turbulence is one of the largest ever recorded. It's going to strike shore somewhere on the coast of Delaware, which is toward the northern end, at this particular point in history, of what has become known as the Storm Coast. The government gives out instructions on the news hubs and through the whisperstream: Superstorm Simon is a seriously big storm. It will disrupt the whole



of Delaware and parts of New Jersey and Maryland as well. You should board up windows and secure your house (more guidance [here](#)). You should stay home! You should not, repeat *not*, try to leave your home, unless you happen to live in one of the nineteen low-lying coastal communities within the affected area designated as being at VERY HIGH risk of flooding (full list [here](#)), in which case you will be personally contacted by federal agencies who will arrange your evacuation in good time before the storm surge comes over the levees. Otherwise, dear citizens of Delaware and neighboring states, do the safest thing and *stay home*.

Four hundred thousand people choose to ignore this. Everyone knows that when a superstorm strikes, people die. What the government is asking of them is that they draw a ticket in a lottery and hope that their number doesn't come up. Those four hundred thousand don't feel like taking that chance. They pile trucks and cars with refrigerators, broadscreens, dogs, settees, babies, washing machines, and head inland, thus causing the total gridlock that will be the single largest cause of death. For it means that, when the hurricane strikes, four hundred thousand people who could have been inside houses with walls and roofs reinforced with steel cages anchored in concrete (as per **federal regulations** under the **Hurricane Defenses Act**), are sitting in fragile metal boxes on a gridlocked highway, unable to move anywhere at all.

And here he comes now. Here's Simon. Here's the superstorm. He's sweeping in. He's reached the land. He's come ashore, spinning like a giant circular saw at 170 miles an hour. He doesn't care where the people are. He doesn't care if they're babies or 105 years old. He doesn't care about the government guidance. SMASH, he hits the coastal towns. CRASH, he throws down trees. SPLASH, he flings the ocean over the flood defenses and tosses boats onto

the land. And when he reaches those gridlocked cars, he sucks out their windscreens, he throws them down embankments, he opens them like tin cans to the screaming air, snatching settees, teddy bears, reading lamps from overloaded roof racks and flinging them out over the fields, and into the floodwaters, and onto the snapped-off branches of broken trees.

Those who have followed the government's advice are lying inside houses with boarded-up windows, hoping that someone else's ticket will come up. Many have built shelters inside their houses made of doors and tables and sandbags, as instructed by government videos. Hiding like children in these playhouses, they hear huge loutish lumps of air striding about outside in hollow streets that once were theirs. They hear those giant louts banging and roaring, flinging stuff around, shoving at roofs and walls. Even steel cages, they know, have sometimes been known to snap.

They can't see what's happening, of course, but who in America hasn't watched these scenes many times over? Houses straining and bulging until they burst, cars doing cartwheels end to end, truck cabins crushed by fallen trees. Some people's houses will blow down, they know. And some people's bodies, now completely whole, will be crushed, or impaled, or filled up with water, or cut wide open by flying glass.

One woman somehow gets dropped onto the weathervane on a church. All of America sees her body hanging there with her butt turning purple and her dress over her face. She's like Superstorm Simon's flag.

## CHAPTER 2

Holly and Richard had spent a lazy evening in their spacious home, twenty miles out of Seattle. Their painter friend Ruby, who they'd known since New York, had messaged earlier to tell them that finally, after several years' wait and many frustrating hours dealing with bureaucracy, she and her partner Ossia had been awarded the much-prized 'red pass' from the Canadian immigration authorities. They could live and work there as permanent residents now, rather than having to renew visas every year, and were on a path that led, more or less automatically, to full citizenship. This was quite an achievement in those days, after Canada had introduced its super-strict 'population cap'. Holly and Richard had decided to celebrate their friends' success. They'd ordered in some food and opened a bottle of bubbly Canadian wine. Now, they called Ruby and Ossia to give their congratulations.

'We still can't get our heads round it,' said Ruby. 'And would you believe, we've found a house too? An amazing house with a beautiful studio. You must come and see it!'

And then there were just the two of them again, Holly and Richard on their new cream-colored sofa, with Holly's legs draped over Richard's, his hand resting on her knee.

‘Lucky them,’ Richard said, ‘a new country, a new home, a new chapter of their lives ahead of them.’

‘Well, what should *we* do,’ Holly asked, ‘to start a new chapter ourselves?’

They discussed whether they should move to Canada too – those green vineyards, that civilized political system – but somehow, it didn’t appeal to either of them. Then Richard asked Holly if there was even a little part of her that wanted to return to England, but she dismissed that idea with an incredulous laugh. Of course not! Her parents still lived there, which was not a plus, and Fortress Britain these days was a nasty, desperate place.

Not so much a fortress, really, Richard observed, but more a sinking ship, a sinking pirate ship, in a sea full of the victims of pirates, many of them still stubbornly swimming toward it, in spite of the musket fire from the decks. And America was a pirate ship too, of course, but at least for a moment it was pretty much afloat.

They talked about having kids. They asked themselves, as they’d done before, whether it was even fair bringing a child into a world like this. And as before, they concluded that their parents could have asked themselves the same question, but they were kind of glad they existed in spite of everything. Just two kids at most, they agreed: there were more than enough human beings on the planet. Rick would be the main carer; Holly earned more than he did, and anyway, he had *much* more patience. They’d have a boy called Saul and a girl called Penny. Just naming them seemed to have brought them close to existence, as if they were people already, who just happened to be very far away.

They opened another bottle of wine and kissed lingeringly. They were *definitely* going to make a start that night on the whole making-kids routine. Or a symbolic start anyway: Holly would

have to see the doctor to have her IUD taken out, and they'd need to make a decision on the timing of that, which was probably a job for when they weren't both half-drunk. They kissed again. Warm summer air wafted in through the window from the gentle night outside. Should they take the wine upstairs right now? But they decided they'd catch the news first. This was still the aftermath of Superstorm Simon and it seemed disrespectful not to keep up to date with what was going on over there.

Drones and drigs were peering down from the sky all over Delaware. 'America's worst storm...People were prepared for storms but not for this...A continuous line of vehicles across four states... Scenes we've gotten used to seeing in the south, but now right up to New Jersey.'

Some of the drigs descended to earth and reporters climbed out to speak to the cops and to the storm people on the grid-locked highways, and to various kind folk who were helping out in heart-warming ways, inviting the storm people in, or walking across fields with sandwiches and flasks of coffee. A woman in Wisconsin had offered her entire house. A town in Pennsylvania had raised half a million dollars. Three men and a woman from upstate New York had hired four trucks, loaded them with tents and sleeping bags, and were heading south.

But not everyone was feeling so kind. The drigs came down outside a town that had been cut off from the rest of America by that glacier of cars and trucks. Four men and two women stood by a barricade. 'Everyone cries about these storm people,' said one of the women, cradling a rifle in her arms. 'But what about us? We can't go to work, we can't go to the stores, we can't even get our kids

into school.' Behind them was a hand-painted sign. 'Keep out,' it read. 'No shelter or food here. Stick to the highway.'

Holly rested her hand on Richard's leg, and stroked the inside of his thigh. Richard gently caressed her hand with his. All of this was bad, they knew, but for them it was just a particularly severe instance of something that had happened at least once every year, somewhere on the Storm Coast, all of their adult lives.

'Horrible people,' Holly said.

'Yeah, but I heard a couple of women talking just like that up at the store earlier today. One of them said something about "those poor folk down there" and I thought at first she was talking about the storm people, but it turned out that what she meant was the ones on the barricades. The other said the storm people had only got themselves to blame. They'd chosen to stay there in the storm country so what did they expect? And now they were causing problems for everyone. I asked them what *they*'d do, if they'd invested everything in their home and it became completely unsaleable.'

Holly grimaced. 'And?'

'They just glared at me.'

'Yeah, and after you'd gone I bet they told each other you were a typical well-to-do delicado, living with your nice things in your nice expensive house, and telling everyone else off for not being more generous-spirited.'

On the broadscreen the governors of Alaska, Idaho and Montana were giving a joint statement. There were only so many storm people their states could take in. They were already struggling to cope with the migrants from the Dust Country in the southwest that had been streaming in all through the summer. The governors were looking at the possibility of their states putting border controls in place to suspend inward migration from the rest of the

USA. Some said this would be unconstitutional, but they disagreed, and were willing to defend their position in court.

There was brief footage of a demonstration in Billings, Montana. 'Enough is enough', 'Montana is full', 'YOUR lack of planning is not MY problem'...

But then a US senator came on, Senator Slaymaker, familiar to both of them because he represented Richard and Holly's own state of Washington, though neither of them had voted for him. 'They are fellow Americans,' he said. He was a big, handsome man, who'd been something of a war hero and had then set up a hauling business which had become one of the biggest in the country. He'd flown to Delaware himself to see what was going on. Slaymaker fixed the camera with his very bright and penetrating eyes. 'We need to remember that. These people are our fellow Americans.'

In the warm darkness outside, branches sighed and rustled, were silent for a while, then sighed again. Richard stroked Holly's knee. Troubling as the news might be, they were still intending to go upstairs directly after this item, and give themselves over to the pleasures of skin and breath and touch.

'I know it's hard for folk in the northern states,' said Senator Slaymaker, 'seeing all these people coming in from the south, but we need to fix things so they can settle down properly, and earn a living for themselves and their families, and don't have to keep having their lives trashed by these storms. It's the same with the people from the Dust Country. No point any more in helping them rebuild where they are,' he said. 'The federal government needs to build more homes up north. And I mean proper homes, not these government camps.'

'Weird,' said Richard. 'He's spent his whole political life battling against big government. And yet now he's calling for a level of

government intervention which no Unity Party government would even dare to suggest! I mean, what *is* his game?’

Holly frowned. Her eyes were still on the broadscreen, but the news had already moved, via trouble in the disputed territories between Russia and China, to a massacre that had happened earlier in the day in the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in North Africa. Thousands of refugees outside the border fence, it seemed, had taken it into their heads to simply force their way through, though Holly barely registered this news.

‘Why do we always assume that people who don’t agree with us have some sort of dishonorable motive?’ she said. ‘How do we know *we’re* not the ones playing a game?’

‘Because he’s not being consistent with what he’s said before. Remember his comment about the famine in Mexico?’ Richard imitated the senator’s soft, firm, Seattle accent: “‘Mexicans have got to look after themselves. We didn’t *ask* them to live in Mexico. We didn’t ask them to have more kids than they knew how ta feed.” Staggeringly callous!’

Then they told the screen to shut down and were alone in their living room again. They began to put things away for the night, ready for bed.

‘Maybe Senator Slaymaker’s selective in his sympathies,’ Holly said as she carried their glasses to the dishwasher. ‘We all *are* really, aren’t we? The way we delicados talk, you’d think we took personal responsibility for all the problems of the world. But we don’t really *act* that way, do we? I mean, what did you and I actually *do* about the famine in Mexico, apart from clucking our tongues at dinner parties and maybe shelling out fifty dollars to some appeal?’

Richard laughed. ‘That, I’m afraid, is a fair point.’

‘Slaymaker’s a self-made man. He had a hard start in life.



A teenage mum on a trailer park, wasn't it? With a drink problem, I think. Or maybe drugs. He had to look after himself from the beginning, so naturally self-reliance is what he believes in. I guess these storm people have touched some chord in him.'

And right at that moment, Holly's cristal beeped.

It was her boss Janet. She worked at that time for a Seattle-based public relations consultancy. She helped businesses with damage limitation when they got themselves into trouble, and she helped them manage public opposition when they wanted to do something controversial. The main account she was working on right then was a local hydro company which was seeking to build new dams in spots that were inevitably someone's favorite bit of wilderness.

'Sorry to call so late, Holly.' Janet's voice was shaky. 'I've got a bit of a crisis going on here. Jack's had to go into hospital. Nothing too terrible, I don't think, but I'd kind of like to be there for him. I was wondering if you could help me out by covering something for me tomorrow. I was going to meet a potential client for lunch, a rather important potential client. Could you take my place?'

Holly said 'yes, of course, absolutely, no trouble at all...' et cetera, and, while she went over in her mind the diary commitments she'd have to reschedule, she asked about Janet's husband and how he was getting on (it was heart trouble) and then about the client.

'Well, it's *very* confidential at this stage, Holly, but if we play our cards right, it could become one of our most important accounts.'

'Wow! Exciting! But you know me, Janet, I'd always—'

'I know, Holly. But this is kind of extra delicate, that's all. You see, the client is Senator Slaymaker. He wants to talk over some aspects of his current project. I don't know if you know he's launching a

campaign for a big resettlement program in the northern states.’

‘Rick and I were just talking about it.’

‘I did a little bit of work for him once, back when he was heading up the Haulers Federation. We were going to meet at Le Lac for lunch tomorrow, and, seeing as he’s already flown up from DC, I said I’d see if you could meet him instead. I told him you were way smarter than me.’

‘Wow!’ said Richard as Holly hung up. ‘Working for Slaymaker? He’s a big figure these days. Some people are saying he’ll run for president. But—’

‘Well, it’s not a presidential campaign we’re going to help with, I assure you. It’s just this campaign of his for more federal help for the storm refugees.’

‘Well, good luck with that. As far as I can see, fewer and fewer people are willing to pay out tax dollars to help out for—’

He broke off because he could see Holly wasn’t listening any more.

‘Listen, Rick, I’m so, so sorry, but I’m meeting him tomorrow, and that means I’m going to have to set aside the rest of this nice evening and put in a couple of hours of preparation.’

Richard walked over to the window to close it for the night. ‘Sure. Of course. Shall I make you some coffee? To clear your head a bit?’

She kissed him. She was already mentally compiling a list of topics that she needed to research. ‘That would be great. But don’t wait up for me after that. I’m not sure how long I’ll be.’

## CHAPTER 3

**R**ichard stared up at the ceiling in the light of his reading lamp.

He'd grown used to Holly acting for clients he didn't approve of. How she explained it was that she was like an attorney in a court of law: her job was to represent people whether she agreed with them or not. And he kind of got that. He was also a little in awe of her for being out there in the world of affairs, and not just the world of ideas that he inhabited. In fact, he loved that about her. Picturing her in her study now, for instance, he smiled to himself. She'd already be *deep* into this new job, those alert, bright eyes darting about as she muttered instructions to her jeenee, had it conjure up data for her onto the multiple screens that she like to array around herself.

And when it was just some hydro company or something, well, there wasn't that much of a downside. Big hydro fought pretty rough, it was true, and upset some of Holly and Richard's friends, but what was the alternative, Richard had always privately thought? America needed power from somewhere to keep the lights on, and the cars on the roads.

Slaymaker, though...

The trees outside began to move again, building up to a level of agitation that was almost a gale, and then falling silent once more.

Slaymaker of all people, that ferocious American nationalist, that bloodstained warrior from America's wars in the African Copper Belt, that self-made man who thought that just because he'd been able to claw his way up from nothing, then everyone else could too. As if being exceptionally smart had nothing to do with it, and exceptionally driven, and exceptionally ruthless.

Again the wind built up, all the trees sighing and hissing together as their branches bent and strained, creaked and groaned, like this time something was going to happen, like this time they were going to really see it through.

But no, the pulse passed, and the night fell still.

There was a side of Holly, he knew, that was drawn to people like Slaymaker: these big, tough, vivid people whose imaginations expressed themselves not in ideas but in tons of concrete, in gigawatts of power. She liked them and she got on very well with them. This was mysterious to him. He knew he'd feel uncomfortable with such people. He knew he'd feel simultaneously disapproving and inadequate. But she was completely at ease with them. It was one of the things that made it impossible for him to resolve Holly into something he could fully understand.

Yes, he dreamily thought, but that was a good thing. He needed her to be different, otherwise the two of them would just be – he pictured this rather than thought it in words, for words were slipping away from him: he was in the factory where words are made – otherwise the two of them would just be a single blob of sameness and they would be alone all over again, looking for something else to reach out to, something else to desire, out there in the world beyond...

The air slithered round the world outside, like soft, loose layers of silky skin, sliding over one another, and under, brushing the cooling surface of the shadowy world.

When Holly finally came into the bedroom, Richard was deeply asleep. She'd worked for three hours by then, searching for information, organizing it, memorizing it: facts about Slaymaker's life and his place in American politics, information about America's internal refugee problem, data about public attitudes. At her company's expense, she'd even conducted a couple of small instant polls, throwing out questions into the Pollcloud – there were always people awake from every demographic who were willing to answer a few questions – and having AI statisticians analyze the answers.

She laid her cristal on her bedstand and turned out the light. Even now, she hadn't finished working. She spoke soundlessly to the jeenee inside her cristal and asked it to give her a taste of what people were saying out there on the whisperstream, right now, about the storm people. So, as she settled herself down, she was hearing conversation after conversation through the tiny implant that she wore in her right ear. It was like opening a chink into a huge dark room, buried beneath America, full of voices – some showing off, some complaining, some trying to be original, some loudly proclaiming their orthodoxy. All were telling stories about themselves and the world, their own particular stance in relation to the world, the way they and the world connected together.

The torrent of voices continued until the jeenee could tell from her brain rhythms that its mistress was asleep. And then, like a

gentle grown-up pulling up the bedcovers and tiptoeing from the room, it slid the volume very slowly down until there was no sound left but Richard's breathing and the wind outside.

## CHAPTER 4

*Rosine Dubois*

I guess we were lucky none of us were hurt. We'd done what the government asked, just stayed there under the table in our kitchen, watching the walls bulging and bending around us, and suddenly, SMASH, a car came through our roof, right through the metal cage and everything. It must have been blown off the flyover, though God knows what that kid was doing, driving a car in a hurricane. But whatever the reason, there he was, or there was his body anyway, his broken body, dangling through the windscreen upside down, right there in our kitchen, with the wind screaming and howling over the hole he'd made.

'Okay,' Herb said, when the storm had finally passed over us. 'You take the boys round to Charlene's and I'll try and figure out how to get that poor kid out of the car.'

Debris lay strewn all around us: pieces of tin roof, torn-off branches, the striped awning from some store. Below us in the lower town, folk were huddled up on the ridges of their roofs, while big choppy waves rolled through the streets.

'The walls are still standing anyway,' Herb said, 'and most of our stuff is okay as well. Tricky part is going to be getting the car out of there without doing more damage, but we'll figure out something.'

But I told him no. This was it. I was done with the Storm Coast. I'd lived here all my life – my ma and pa too – but I was done with it.

'We should've got out of here years ago, when the house was still worth something,' I told him.

We both knew I'd suggested this way back, and that Herb had firmly said no.

'Okay, Rosine,' he said, 'if you want me to say you were right I'll admit it now. You *were* right, and I'm sorry. But it's kind of late for moving now. No one will give us a penny for this place, so how are we going to get somewhere else to live? And how are we going to feed the kids? There's going to be thousands of people heading away from the coast after this, hundreds of thousands most likely, and they'll all be looking for jobs and homes, along with all those Californians and desert people. At least we've both got work here, and the land and the house.'

'We're not staying, Herb. You got to think ahead. Things aren't going to stay the same, are they? That's not how it works these days. If we don't leave now, we'll be wishing we did in two years' time, the same as we wish now we'd left two years ago.'

Neighbors were outside as well by now, under the darkening sky, looking round at the damage.

People started to come over to ask if we wanted beds for the night. Our friend Charlene took our boys in, fed them ice cream, and let them play with a couple of new broadscreen-games that she'd put aside for her own kids for Christmas, and then me and Herb, Charlene and two or three others levered open the door of the upside-down car, wrapped a sheet round that dead kid, and



pulled him out, laying him down at the back of the yard where we wouldn't have to keep looking at him. He was awful broken-up.

Charlene's husband Luther fetched some rags to wipe up the blood that had dripped out onto the kitchen floor, and after that, we went and inspected our truck. It was okay. The storm-proof door on our garage had held out, and the main battery and the spare had both been fully charged up before Simon brought down the power lines. We lifted the spare battery into the flatbed, and then loaded up everything else we could fit in that was of any value: the broadscreen, the washing machine, the best bed.

'Sure you want to leave right now?' Charlene asked. 'Hubs say the traffic's backed up twenty miles out of town north, south and west.'

'Sooner we get into the line, the sooner we'll reach the end of it,' I said.

'Where you going to go?' Luther asked.

'North and west, I guess,' Herb said. 'Out of the storm country as fast as we can.'

'We may not be far behind you,' Charlene said. 'Make sure you tell us where you all end up, you hear?'

She glanced over at the dead body lying against the yard fence.

Beyond, over the lower town, a couple of police drigs were moving slowly over the rooftops – not picking anyone up, as far as I could see, though folks were waving and yelling for them to come down, just sweeping search lights back and forth. Looking for looters, I guess. Looking for someone they could shoot.